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Reflections on a Fulbright Year in Bahrain

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Reflections on a Fulbright Year in Bahrain

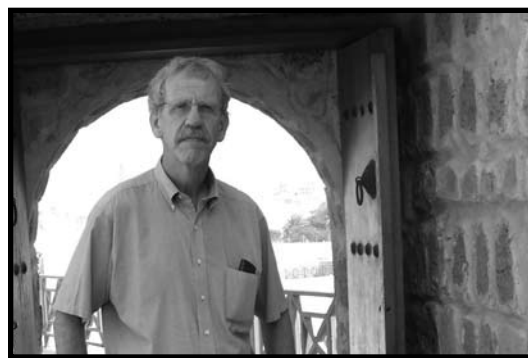
Philip Tabakow

STARTING WITH A LITTLE BAHRAINI GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

Before applying for a Fulbright Lecturing Award in American Literature at the University of Bahrain, before Michael Jackson's media-hyped relocation to the kingdom, I, like most Americans, was only vaguely aware of the existence of a small island country called the Kingdom of Bahrain located somewhere in the Middle East. Now, after my family and I have been living in Bahrain for seven months (without so far having spotted Mr. Jackson at the Seef Mall), we've learned a lot about both Bahrain and the whole Middle East. In fact, our children, Alexis, 15, and Nicholas, 14, are among the very few Americans attending St. Christopher's School, a British curriculum school, with a truly international student body.

The Kingdom of Bahrain, rather than being a single island, is an archipelago of thirty-three islands which lies due east of Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf (sometimes called the Arabian Gulf here). Only three of the islands are inhabited: Bahrain Island, Muharraq (where Bahrain International Airport is located), and Sitra. These three populated islands are connected by causeways, as is Bahrain Island itself, to the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia by the twenty-six kilometer King Fahd Causeway. Bahrain is a mostly low-lying desert country, with a total area of only about 700 square kilometers. Not long ago, our daughter Alexis trekked with classmates across the entire width of the main island at its narrowest point (about 20 kilometers). The highest elevation in the country at 124 meters is Jebel ad Durkhan ("Mountain of Smoke") in the central desert region of Bahrain Island near Sakhir, where the main campus of the University of Bahrain is located.

Despite its small size, Bahrain has a long, complex, and important history. It was the seat of the ancient civilization of Dilmun (see Geoffrey Bibby's *Looking for Dilmun*) which served as an important link between the early civilizations of Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley. One cuneiform tablet dated to 3100 B.C. describes Dilmun as a paradise where the inhabitants "were eternally young and suffered no illness" and "where the raven did not croak and wolves and lions did not devour their prey"—a veritable Eden.



Dilmun is also mentioned in *The Saga of Gilgamesh*, the world's oldest literary text, as being associated with Enki, the god of wisdom and water, and Gilgamesh, King of Uruk. Because of the many fresh-water springs in Bahrain (the word "Bahrain" means "two seas" in Arabic), ships traveling eastward from the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers always stopped here to garner supplies of "sweet" water and fresh vegetables. Remarkably, off the coast of Bahrain, springs of potable water even rise up out of the salt waters of the Gulf like geysers.

Ancient Dilmun featured one of the world's largest necropolises with an estimated 200,000 grave mounds, most dating back to the third and second millennia B.C. Though urban development has taken its toll, it is still possible today (as my wife and I have done near our home in A'Ali) to walk through extensive areas of these rounded earth and stone covered burial mounds, most plundered in the long past of their rock-lined central chamber's contents.

Bahrain converted to Islam in the 7th century, and, in more modern times, was conquered by the Portuguese in 1521 (who left behind a large fort—now completely restored—near the northern coastline). Eventually over the course of the next two centuries, Bahrain came under the control of the king of Persia, who politically supported the archipelago's Shia majority. However, in the late 18th century, Bahrain was conquered by tribes associated with the Sunni Al Khalifa family, who soon entered into a treaty relationship with the United Kingdom—and Bahrain became a British protectorate. In 1971, still under Al Khalifa family rule, Bahrain became a fully independent nation.

CONTEMPORARY BAHRAIN

In 1932 Bahrain became the first Arabian Gulf country to discover recoverable commercial quantities of oil. However, since Bahrain's supply of oil is quite small—especially by Gulf standards—the country was soon forced to diversify its economy. Fortunately, Bahrain's long history as a trading center and its well-educated

population made the transition to a more diversified economy possible. Nevertheless, according to recent statistics, production of petroleum and petroleum processing still account for 60% of export receipts, 60% of government revenues (with no taxes of any kind in Bahrain!), and 30% of GDP.

Of Bahrain's total population of about 700,000 people, approximately 450,000 are Bahraini citizens. Compared to most Gulf countries (with Saudi Arabia a special case.), this ratio of citizens to expatriate workers is quite high. Bahrain is also distinguished from other Gulf countries by its Shia religious majority. Not surprisingly, from time to time in recent history, Bahrain has been claimed by both Iran and Iraq—the only two other predominantly Shia Middle Eastern countries. Since Bahrain is ruled by the Sunni Al Khalifa family, no current figures on exact Shia/Sunni percentages seem to be available. Estimates, however, suggest that 60 to 80% of its Muslim citizens are Shia. In fact, *Wikipedia* claims that “according to the 2001 census, 81.2% of Bahrain's population [citizen and non-citizen] was Muslim (Shia and Sunni), 9% were Christian, and 9.8% practiced other Asian or Middle Eastern religions.” Unlike neighboring Saudi Arabia, Bahraini women—though many wear the traditional black *abbaya* and *hijab*—vote, drive automobiles, and are free to work in most occupations.

Despite its official designation as an Islamic Arab country, any newcomer soon becomes aware that Bahrain is a racially, religiously, and culturally diverse society. Approximately two-thirds of Bahrain's population is of Arabic descent; most of the other third, including immigrants and guest workers, come from Iran, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. English is widely spoken by Bahrainis of all backgrounds, and, in most respects, Bahrain is a sophisticated and cosmopolitan country. Specialty stores flourish. Just recently, the first Formula 1 Grand Prix Auto Race of the 2006 season drew large numbers of international visitors and celebrities to the Bahrain International Circuit.

Based on a constitution promulgated on February 14, 2002, Bahrain is now a constitutional hereditary monarchy, with King Hammad bin Isa Al-Khalifa as head of state. The prime minister (King Hammad's uncle) and cabinet are appointed directly by the king. There is a bicameral legislature consisting of a Shura Council, whose members are appointed by the king, and a House of Deputies, whose members are directly elected to serve four year terms. Political parties are banned, but “politically-oriented societies” are allowed. Given this governing structure and the strictures against political parties, effective political control still remains securely within the Al-Khalifa family.

BAHRAIN, THE UNITED STATES, AND THE AMERICAN STUDIES CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BAHRAIN

Since 1948, The U.S. Naval Support Facility, which covers sixty acres in the city of Manama (Bahrain's capital), has been the headquarters of the Fifth Fleet and of American naval operations in the Persian Gulf. Needless to say, the U.S. government considers its relationship with Bahrain to be very important and maintains full diplomatic relations with the kingdom at the ambassadorial level. Just recently the U.S. Congress approved the free trade agreement between Bahrain and the United States signed in November 2004, the first such agreement with a Gulf country.

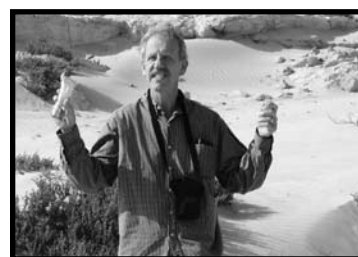
The current U.S. ambassador to Bahrain is William T. Monroe. His predecessor, Johnny Young (responding to the initiative of Dr. Mohammed Al-Ghatam, the former president of the University of Bahrain [UOB]) helped found the American Studies Center at the University of Bahrain in May 1998—the first American Studies Center established at a Middle Eastern University. Since that time American Study Centers have also been opened at the American University of Beirut and at the University of Cairo, and a number of other universities in the Middle East are exploring the possibility of opening centers in the near future.

The American Studies Center, a division of the Department of English Language and Literature in the College of Arts at UOB, offers English majors the option of a 30 credit-hour minor in American Studies—to be chosen from courses in American government, history, geography, literature, and cultural studies. The enthusiastic and able director of the center, Dr. John Hillis, is an American who has been teaching as a member of the UOB English Department for seventeen years. The center's teaching faculty includes American political scientist Dr. Colin Cavell, as well as a number of Middle Eastern faculty members, including Dr. Abdul Aziz Bulaila, Chairman of the Department of English Language and Literature.

As a Fulbright Lecturer, I am teaching a course this semester entitled “Diverse Voices in Recent American

**Above,
Mary Tabakow, Phil
Tabakow, Wasan Al
Olaiwat,
Shireen
Mohammed Ali,
Shaima Abdulwahed,
Fatema Hasan Ali in
the American
Studies Center.**

**Below,
Dr. Tabakow
in the Bahrain
southern desert hold-
ing gazelle bones.**



Poetry”—a course developed in conjunction with “The Diverse Voices in American Literature” Symposium being hosted by the American Studies Center March 27-29, 2006. Other English Department courses I’ve offered during the year range from a senior-level research paper writing course to a course in Modern European Drama to a “Special Author” course on the poetry of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson.

My wife Dr. Mary Tabakow, an Adjunct Assistant Professor for the 2005-06 year, has also been teaching literature courses; and together, we believe that we are making a significant contribution to the Department of English Language and Literature. As well as teaching scheduled courses for the department, we have been offering a non-credit creative writing workshop for UOB students interested in writing poetry, fiction, drama, and literary non-fiction in English. This may be the first time such an opportunity has been presented at the University of Bahrain, and the students have responded enthusiastically to it. We are also serving on the organizing committee for a creative writing student competition—part of the UOB Arts College Cultural Festival being held in April.

In addition, along with Dr. Hillis, my wife and I represented UOB and the American Studies Center at the first International American Studies Conference ever to be held in the Middle East in December 2005, which was hosted by the American University of Beirut. In a related context (as part of the department’s eventual goal of gaining international accreditation), I have also submitted a report evaluating the curriculum of the UOB Department of English Language and Literature’s program in relation to comparable U.S. and Middle Eastern programs.

These varied teaching, research, and service opportunities have made this an exciting and professionally satisfying year for my wife and me at the University of Bahrain. And it has been especially rewarding to have had the chance to work with the many Bahraini students who are so welcoming, so interested in what we have to bring to them, and so eager to share their own culture with us (though they do smile politely when we try to use our broken Arabic). In the end, it is the unique opportunity to build relationships of trust and mutual learning with students from another culture that makes the Fulbright teaching experience so satisfying. I look forward to sharing the rewards of my experiences with the BSC community, as well as to exploring the many exciting possibilities for interdisciplinary collaborations with colleagues throughout the college.

—Philip Tabakow is Associate Professor of English.



Dr. Tabakow at Bahrain Portuguese Fort overlooking the Dilmun excavations.